

Panhandle Health District

8500 N. Atlas Road Hayden, Idaho 83835
www.phd1.idaho.gov

Reduce Infant Risk with Behavior Changes

By Cynthia Taggart
Panhandle Health District

The death of any child is unbearably unfair, and nothing is more agonizing than an unexplained death. More than 4,500 infants in the United States die suddenly each year of no obvious cause, leaving families reeling and desperate for answers.

In at least half the cases of Sudden Unexplained Infant Death, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) is the answer, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). SIDS is the leading cause of death among infants during their first year, and most of those deaths occur during the first four months of life.

SIDS is not a comfortable diagnosis for the medical world. It can be reached only if a complete examination of the death scene, a review of the baby's clinical history and an autopsy fail to pinpoint a cause of death.

"My heart as a mother and a nurse goes out to these families," says Lora Whalen, R.N. and director of Panhandle Health District's Family and Community Health division. "It's a diagnosis of exclusion and families want answers."

SIDS strikes fear into most parents because its selection appears random. But medical research shows that infants who die from SIDS share certain risk factors. SIDS babies often sleep on their stomachs or sleep on soft bedding, such as bean bag cushions or foam pads. Loose bedding, such as comforters or pillows, or sleeping with their parents also increases the risk of SIDS.

SIDS occurs more often in babies who are too warm—overdressed, too many blankets or a heat source that's too high. SIDS babies are often born to mothers who smoke during pregnancy and after birth or to mothers who are younger than 20 for their first pregnancy.

Babies who received no or late prenatal care and who are premature or have a low birth weight also are more likely to die from SIDS.

"If you know ways to prevent death or limit injury, like wearing a seat belt in the car, you wear the seat belt. We know smoking can be associated with SIDS, so don't smoke," Whalen says.

Behavior changes are effective. SIDS rates have declined by more than 50 percent since 1990 when a national campaign called "Back to Sleep" began to teach parents that babies should sleep on their backs and on firm mattresses or surfaces.

"We know without question that the single biggest thing we can do to resist the risk of SIDS is make sure babies sleep on their backs," says Dr. Terence Neff, a pediatrician with Coeur d'Alene Pediatrics. "Sleeping in bed with a child is another big risk and the third is smoking.

"Smoking while pregnant doubles the risk of crib death and smoking after giving birth triples the risk."

Some factors are beyond a single family's control. The rate of SIDS in African-American babies is more than twice the rate it is in white babies. In American Indian/Alaskan Native babies, the rate is about three times higher than it is for white babies. Boys are at higher risk for SIDS than girls and SIDS kills more babies in winter than summer.

Still, "The vast majority of SIDS cases do fall into the risk categories and we can do something about that," Neff says.

When parents who smoke or sleep with their babies ask Neff if vaccinations will endanger their children, the pediatrician bristles. Several scientific studies on the risk factors for SIDS show that infants who are immunized have a lower risk of SIDS.

“Parents need to realize just how dangerous cigarette smoking is for their children,” Neff says. “It’s the poisonous gas in cigarettes that kills kids. It gives them cancer. If parents smoke away from the kids but don’t change their clothes, it’s still poisoning them.”

Children in developing countries die at alarmingly high rates from diseases vaccines prevent because they have limited or no access to vaccines, Whalen says.

“Look at the diseases we’ve quelled with vaccines,” she says. “Our children benefit from them. Without them, we have potential for vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks.”

SIDS will remain a CDC research priority. With information from states about the circumstances surrounding infant deaths, the CDC will continue to monitor trends and identify additional risk factors associated with this heart-breaker.